



# FAMILY HISTORY PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVE

## WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

People who have close relatives with common diseases (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, and cancer) are more likely to develop those diseases themselves. Although clinicians are trained to collect family histories, they often fail to do so because of lack of time, reimbursement, and skills in interpreting the information. As a risk factor that reflects inherited genetic susceptibility as well as shared environment and behaviors, family history has untapped potential as a “low-tech” genomic tool for public health and preventive medicine.

## WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

The CDC Office of Genomics and Disease Prevention, in collaboration with several CDC programs and NIH institutes, began an initiative in 2002 to develop and evaluate the use of family history for risk assessment and disease prevention. Major activities have included the following:

- Assessing existing strategies, publishing two white papers reviewing the evidence, recruiting an expert panel to review disease specific data, and forming a multi-disciplinary multi-agency workgroup to guide the initiative.
- Developing a web-based tool, *Family Healthware*<sup>™</sup> that collects information about health behaviors, screening tests, and a person’s family history for six diseases — coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and colorectal, breast, and ovarian cancer. Algorithms in the software analyze the family history data and provide a qualitative assessment of familial risk for each disease. Another set of algorithms provides recommendations for lifestyle changes and screening tests tailored to family history risk.
- Initiating research and evaluation projects to examine the validity and utility of using family history to assess disease risk and motivate preventive behaviors. In Fiscal Year 2003, CDC funded three research centers to conduct a clinical trial of *Family Healthware*<sup>™</sup>. The study, consisting of approximately 8,400 patients who attend primary care practices, will measure whether family history risk assessment, stratification, and personal prevention messages influence health behaviors and use of medical services.
- Promoting family history to the public and provider education via a new web site for the public with fact sheets, presentations, case studies, news articles, links, and other resources.
- Collaborating with NIH, and other federal agencies on the Surgeon General’s Family History Initiative and with the American Academy of Family Physicians to produce CME materials on family history.

## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Validating the new, self-administered family history tools will support the use of family history as a screening tool for disease prevention and health promotion. Several federal and professional initiatives are converging to work synergistically on public health awareness campaigns and health provider education. Further research and development will focus on all the life stages—from children to older adults—where family history assessment has the potential to prevent disease.